


**You never know
when a story is over.**
*(Especially when
you're in it.)*



This is the second chapter in a series written by Gareth Higgins, Editor/Publisher, *The Porch*. The first, *The Story is a Shelter*, can be found here:

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CONTENTS

The Buzz	3
Paris, 1997	6
What's in it for the leper?	11
An Invitation	14

The Buzz

It starts in my chest, tightening. My legs feel unstable. My temples ache. I get the not-nice kind of goosebumps. My head tries to turn away, repelled by what it thinks it can see. And I think about mistakes, who has been hurt, what punishment awaits. I spiral downward into the fear that nothing I can do will atone for the mistakes of the past, and forward into the melancholic fog which threatens that I'll keep repeating the same mistakes forever, or worse. This foreboding stabs me in the sternum, a dart. Though I attempt self-psychotherapy, my body is seized by terror, luxuriating in gorgeous, wasteful distractions: a plummet into darkness where the mind's recesses gape like a mouth, where my future annihilations vomit themselves onto the blurry screen of my broken ego.

I left the gas stove lit or the door unlocked quickly becomes I'm going to go bankrupt.

Then it's only a skip and a jump to *I'll never be happy, I'll never be at home, or I'm going to be the victim of violence.*

I'm going to be destroyed, surely.

Over time, these notions have become intimate with my inner landscape. I've rehearsed them even as the person visible to the outside world has seemed gentle and funny and happy. I can play the game with the crowd, to impress them or just to keep myself afloat. I remember standing on a platform giving a talk to five hundred serious religious people about sectarianism in Ireland, and the crowd laughed and clapped in the right places; they lined up afterward to tell me how good it had been, and one even referred to it as a "historic moment" in the life of that already very historic institution. But while I was on the stage riffing on my prepared text, showing slides and politely sipping my glass of water, trying to champion amends for ancient enmities, a radical overhaul of leadership style, seeking to summon the gall to confront the empire, the

voice in my head was not proud or quietly confident. It was terrified. It was buzzing: *You're not good enough. And everybody knows it. You're going to be punished.*

Buzzing is a helpful term, because these thoughts are like bees: they encircle my mind and, every now and then, sting.

I have learned ways of accepting these little voices. I have visited them so often that their torments are second nature to me. There are good reasons why my psyche latched onto the idea that something awful was going to happen to me. I was formed in a place where awful things were always happening, or so we were told. As far as our media and community leaders were concerned, the violent civil conflict in northern Ireland was *the story* of our lives. In some senses we *were* violence, because our very identities were explained to us in oppositional, or at least defensive, terms. We learned to live with the harsh exterior of either aggressive attack, or rhetorical negativity, believing that triumphal denunciation or physical humiliation of the other would keep us strong. We embodied the myth of redemptive violence, acting as if denying the needs of people who were different would both erase them *and* establish our nation. We were, in the end, merely feeding the beast that wanted to devour us. Our aggressive stance was not manifesting love or healthy pride, but, to use the Canadian poet Bruce Cockburn's words, "projecting our shit at the world, self-hatred tarted up as payback time."

We were victims of what social scientists call *the availability heuristic*—the way human beings predict the probability of something happening based on how easily we can recall examples of similar things. We were surrounded by violence, or at least that's what our culture told us. We were also surrounded by hospitality and green fields and laughter and kindness, but those stories don't usually make the news, so we believed that violence was our way of life. The availability heuristic worked on us, grinding down our sense of possibility until all that was left was akin to holding up a photograph of a gruesome crime scene into a fairground hall of mirrors; and we bought it. Partly because we didn't understand it, and partly because it is a natural response to genuine trauma to go hide in a corner, we believed that everything was going to hell. We believed that our

posture toward life should be that of the last people on a life raft trying to make sure that no one else weighed it down, that no one could be trusted, and that we were always right.

This kind of thinking is very costly. Seamus Heaney evoked the feeling of presumptive mistrust that northern Irish people lived with in his phrase "whatever you say, say nothing"—and not being able to talk honestly with others means it is natural to develop an overactive voice in your own head. The voice in my head swarmed like angry bees, and I spent my childhood talking to myself. I talked myself into believing that I was in danger all the time, and that because I was different, there was something wrong with me. You can, of course, *choose* to visit your little torturers and thereby maintain some facsimile of control. But unless you're doing it as part of something therapeutic like intentional shadow work, this is only as wise as the alcoholic who tells himself that he can have *just one drink* and it'll be fine.

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This is who I was when I arrived at Máméan: a person who wanted to work for peace, who was trying to love other people and make them laugh, but who on the inside was constantly living on the edge of debilitating fear. At the top of the mountain I would begin to discover that the best thing I could do with fear is to build a shelter, not to make it disappear, but in which I could learn a better story about myself, and make it come true.

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By the time that day came, the voice in my head had developed a pristine vocabulary dedicated to one thing: overwhelming me with fear. Actually, that may not be strictly true because there was another voice, too. It had learned something else: to ask for help. I have never really identified with the stories of people who kept things

bottled up inside, and at any rate my fear was so painful that I couldn't ignore it. I have always been a talker, so I talked to anyone who would listen, inked my anxiety onto the blotting paper I perceived my fellow human beings to be. Perception turned out to be important, because it was not ultimately the wound or the traumatic effects of the wound that were the problem. It was how I thought about them.

Paris, 1997

I know this, because a Swiss Army veteran once asked me to share a cigarillo with him under the Eiffel Tower. In the summer of 1997, I found myself in Paris for a night at the end of a month's traveling round the continent by train. (Nepalese food in Amsterdam, Woody Allen films in Prague, baguettes and cheese in Geneva, climbing up the tower with the angel statue in Berlin, Lutheran Eucharist on the streets of Oslo, seeing Hulk Hogan or someone who should earn a living as his impersonator on the world's steepest railway, walking among architecture in Copenhagen and a fish market in Stockholm, dancing in Barcelona, standing still in Auschwitz.) I had a day free before my flight home, and was able to take a train to the city of light. So I did what all right-thinking aspirational hipster Euro-railers would do. I went down to the most recognizable tourist trap in the most romantic city in the world, familiar from a dozen disaster movie clips wherein the tower's collapse/explosion/flooding/vaporization stands in for the colonization of Europe by terrorists/aliens/meteorites/Godzillas. It was, of course, also the emblem of Rick and Isla's love in *Casablanca*; they would "always have Paris," and this same thought would eventually guide me to a place of profound comfort. Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman's story turned out to be as transcendent a parable as any in the more conventional sacred texts. But I didn't know that yet. I was just visiting the Eiffel Tower with a pack of Cohiba cigarillos in my pocket, which at that point in my 22-year-old life was probably the most expensive single-item purchase I had yet made. It was a ten-pack of the small cigars, made in Cuba, bought in La Rochelle, smoked with the kind of effort one has to exert in order to make something look effortless. There were five left by the time I got to Paris. The admission fee to the tower was beyond my budget,

so I laid on my back underneath it, gazing up at the gorgeous, over-sized Meccano from within, imagining myself as if I had just been born and was looking back at where I came from. I was about to be born again.

I wandered down to the bridge beside the tower, the Pont de l'Alma, and sat by the Seine. I lit up cigarillo #6 and smoked it like the insecure northern Irish protestant that I was, scared of everything including himself, trying to hide it, even though the only other people on the Pont de l'Alma were already smoking. A man approached with the unmistakable aroma of someone who hasn't washed in a while, although he had certainly washed down whatever he had eaten recently with a measure or three of whiskey and beer. He asked if he could have a cigarillo, and I obliged. I had enough French for us to be able to carry out a modicum of conversation, so we talked a while.

His name was Jean-Marc and he had come to Paris from Switzerland five months previously after spending time in the army. He had fallen on hard times, and now he was living outside. I remember at one point he said, "Paris only cares about tourists. She doesn't care about her own people." He cried a little when he said this. He avoided my eyes while talking, looking toward the river.

Time did what time does, and soon enough it was also time for me to take the last metro home. So I asked him if I could give him some money, but he declined. I asked if there was anything else I could give him, gritting my teeth and quietly hoping that he would not request the remaining three cigars. Mid-grit, another thought: "Give to those who ask of you." (Someone else's thought, but still, it showed up in my brain.) Jean-Marc did indeed ask for the cigars, and I gave them with a secret grimace. He reached into his backpack and took out a set of electric hair clippers that he told me he had found on the street. He handed them to me as a trade. He grabbed my shoulders and embraced me, kissing me on the cheeks the way French people do.

And then he pulled my face close to his, and kissed me full on the lips, lingering. I tasted his beer and his stubble, and I saw his eyes up close, and he held my face in his

hands. Moving back a couple of inches, he said, “Je n’ai pas le SIDA. Je vous faites plaisir?” Only today I notice that he was using the formal form of “you” in offering to have sex with me for money after telling me that he did not have AIDS. I can still see his dark and lovely eyes and hear his earlier tears, the snuffle after telling me how his adopted city did not care about him.

We awkwardly found a way out of that conversation, I hugged him again, took the Metro back to the flat I was staying in, and dined out on the story of Jean-Marc for years to come.

Initially I told the story as an illustration of how religious people often approach people we consider to be “other” as if *they* are the subjects of *our* truth-spreading; as if only *we* have something to give *them*; as if *they* have nothing to give *us* except their acquiescence. For years I told the story of meeting Jean-Marc as a provocation to people like me to stop acting as if everyone else is merely a receptacle for our spiritual wisdom, as if Jean-Marc were just a plaything for my ego. If we approach people as unwitting potential sectarian recruits, it should be no surprise that sometimes they react as if we’re carrying out an economic transaction. When you build relationships on othering, you learn more about math than love.

Telling the story that way carried me through lots of seminars, conferences, and one-to-one conversations about peacemaking and othering, not to mention providing an indulgence for my ego. The ego will always, of course, eventually reveal itself—like urine down the inside leg, which gives a nice glow in the moment, but ultimately turns cold and bitter. You can only tell a story in which you are the hero for so long before you either discover you weren’t, or some act of actual heroism will be required of you.

It took fourteen years for my day of reckoning.

When the Cohibas found me again, I was giving my little talk in a church in North Carolina, relying on the story of Jean-Marc and the cigars in Paris to illustrate my point

about religion and identity and transactional relating when the pastor stood up and exited the room. Knocked off my game, I struggled to bring the talk in for a soft landing. The pastor was gone only a few minutes, and I was relieved on his return to see he bore a beaming smile on his face. He held a wooden box. He took the stage, thanked me, handed me box, and said, "I think these are yours."

His friend had been in Cuba the previous week and returned with a gift, in a lovely wooden box, of three Cohiba cigars. They had been traveling for almost a decade and a half, across an ocean, to find me in a church in a part of the country I was adopting, just so that I could be hit by this lightning: I am living a story-in-progress.

We're all living a story-in-progress.

Our identities are formed and re-formed through the way we construct and revise the story: the version we tell ourselves, the version we tell others, the version we fear is true, and the version we hope for. The way we receive and hold onto our memories is the foundation of the story. By paying some attention and doing some work to reframe our memories, we can alter that foundation, remaking it for our own healing.

The first way I framed the story of Paris and Jean-Marc and Cohiba cigars, it ended in the summer of 1997. But fourteen years later the same brand and the same number of cigars and I all arrived in the same place at the same time, and the story was forever changed. It's still a story in which I learned that othering people makes for transactional relationships rather than those founded on love. But that's not the heart of the story. The heart of the story is a point about stories themselves. And the point is this: you never know when a story is over, especially if you're in it.

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I know this to be true because it happened to me. And not only once, but every day. Two years after the cigars caught up with me, I was giving another talk, at another

conference, this time in England, the invitation being to share something meaningful in ten minutes or less. I told the condensed version of the story of Jean-Marc and the cigars and the church and the other cigars and the story and the ending that you can't be sure of. As I spoke, a new revelation emerged. A friend had seeded this earlier that summer, suggesting that I was still missing the point. By the time it came for me to tell the cigar story in public once more, it had come to mean something so profound that if it were not true, I would consider it bad writing. My friend told me that, yes, it's good to try to wean ourselves off the patronizing and sectarian thinking that leads us to treat people as others; it's good to move beyond transaction and into relationship. Sure, it's great to begin to understand that we can re-interpret those stories, especially given that our identities are shaped by the stories we're telling. Especially because we can never know when a story is over. Especially if we're in it. It is indeed the seed of the healing of the human race, not to mention the planet, to learn that we suffer when we believe our thoughts, that none of our thoughts are immutable, and that all of our stories can be told anew, every single day, transforming our pain into wonder. Yes, these are brilliant lessons, and how lovely it is that I have a little story to tell that is two parts fun, one part pathos, and that illustrates these liberative notions. But still, my friend said, you're missing the point:

“Sixteen years ago, something happened to you that everyone wants to have happen to them. It's the archetype of romance. It's something people fantasize about, but never believe they could ever actually have. And you not only got to have it, but for sixteen years you haven't even noticed.”

I still didn't get it, so I asked him: “What is this thing I've been missing?”

“It's simple,” he said. “You were kissed by a beautiful stranger, under the Eiffel Tower.”

What's in it for the leper?

You never know when a story is over, especially if you're in it. You never really know what the story is about, even if you're the protagonist. And you might not know the point of a story, even if you're the one telling it. Doesn't everyone want to be kissed by a stranger under the Eiffel Tower? I posed this question as the flourishing punchline to my talk at the conference in England. I ended the talk with a wry smile, received the applause, and wandered over to the beer tent to meet some friends: Jonny and Susan and Jayne and their friend Heather, whom I had not met before. After one round of ales had been consumed, I headed to the bar. When I returned, in the middle of the wooden picnic table, on its own, placed there as a gift for me by Heather whom I did not know, and who did not know me, at an angle that pointed true north, there was a Churchill-sized Cohiba cigar.

∞

I've thought about Jean-Marc many times in the twenty years since we met. I don't, of course, know where he is, how he is, or even if he is still alive. I googled a photograph of the Pont de l'Alma a few days ago, and of course the hope that perhaps he would be in it snuck up on me. After telling and retelling the story of our meeting on a balmy Parisian night when I was 22, I know two things:

You may not know the point of the story, even when you're telling it.

You never know when a story is over, especially when you're in it.

These aphorisms feel like they point to a substance that might last; and one of the beautiful things about them is that they contain the seeds of their own expansion. If you never *know* when a story is over, then, quite simply, you don't need to believe it. If you're living through difficult times, this may be of some comfort to you. If you don't know the point of a story, even if you're the one telling it, this allows for endless possibilities of reframing your own life, liberating yourself from old paradigms that no

longer serve. And what might really expand your horizons is that reframing your story could include the most radical reframing of all: don't just play around with the ending, but try experimenting with the cast. Are you really at the center of all the stories you tell yourself about yourself? Is there someone walking the streets of Paris tonight who has profoundly affected your life because of a forty-minute encounter you had with them two decades ago? More than that, is there someone walking the streets of Edinburgh, Stockholm, or Auckland, who has profoundly affected your life, precisely because you *haven't* met them? Are you the hero of the story you're telling? Yes? Really? That response may seem natural and utterly obvious, but I'm not so certain anymore.

I'll tell you this for sure: I'm not the protagonist of Jean-Marc's story.

When St. Francis kissed a man with leprosy, an entire branch of Christian theology and practice was born. Francis became the icon for people seeking to serve among the most marginalized people; and this is, of course, a wonderful thing. All respect to Brother Francis. But we never hear what happened to the guy he kissed. He is just left by the side of the road, a launching point for revelation in the life of Francis, and a sermon illustration that has lasted almost a millennium. But, as my husband Brian says, what's in it for the leper?

What, indeed? Did Jean-Marc ever think of me again? Was he angry or let down? Did he know he was giving me a gift? It's a beautiful troubling of my waters to consider that in this story, I may actually be the leper, and not St Francis. I may not be the protagonist at all.

~

Removing burdens and reframing stories is our task here. The shelter on Máméan removed us from the burden of torrential rain, and changed the way we thought about the mountain, and this is what shelters always do: they remove burdens and reframe perspectives. When you're walking up Máméan beneath unleashed sky, you

may labor under the misapprehension that it is your job to hold up the heavens. But a few feet of ancient stone roof is more than enough to liberate from that notion.

Growing up in a region where violence was presented as the story of our lives, where uncertainty was the only thing I could rely on, I was easy fodder for fear. But even later, when a peace process had largely ended the violence of the conflict, I was not free from fear, because the fear had worked its way into my spirit in ways that would not respond to reason or political change alone. Politics was never the root of fear anyway—at least not politics of the temporal kind. Fear is a spiritual condition, and doesn't depend on external realities but their perception. Of course this is true, as plenty of people never experience real world violence up close and personal but still live in fear, thinking *surely I am going to be found out. Surely I will be destroyed*. So, if we can change the burden of fear by reframing our perspective, why are we afraid in the first place?

An Invitation

Find a quiet place to sit, and one in which there are few distractions.

Allow your breathing to slow down to a rhythm that is long but unforced.

Take long, luxurious breaths in, and out, noticing and even enjoying the rising and falling of your chest.

Don't hold your breath, just let it lengthen.

And now, allow an image or a thought that reminds you of gratitude, compassion, or love to surface in your mind.

It could be the face of a loved one, or a life-giving quotation from your favorite writer, a place you love to visit, or even part of your favorite movie or book.

As you inhale, let the image or thought get clearer.

(When I do this exercise, I like to image the image projected onto an enormous outdoor movie screen in front of a mountain. It looks pretty spectacular that way!)

As the image or thought gets clearer, keep breathing.

And when the image or thought is very clear, you can do something miraculous with it.

As you breathe out, this time send the image or thought to every cell of your body.

Inhale again, and as you breathe out, send the image or thought once more, to every cell of your body. Inhale again, and send the image or thought to anyone you feel might need it. And then send it to the world.

This exercise can be done in a minute or so, or you can spend hours on it.

With a wee bit of practice, you can do it anywhere.

Gaining some more control over the pace of our breathing may be the most effective step we can take toward transcending fear. Neuroscience tells us that how we breathe affects how we think; and more recent research and practice in what is called sensorimotor psychotherapy goes even further: how you walk affects how you talk. Consider slowing your walking pace by just a little bit, and see what happens to your thoughts. Slow down. It will speed up your ability to heal the world.

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